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A Man and His Opportunity

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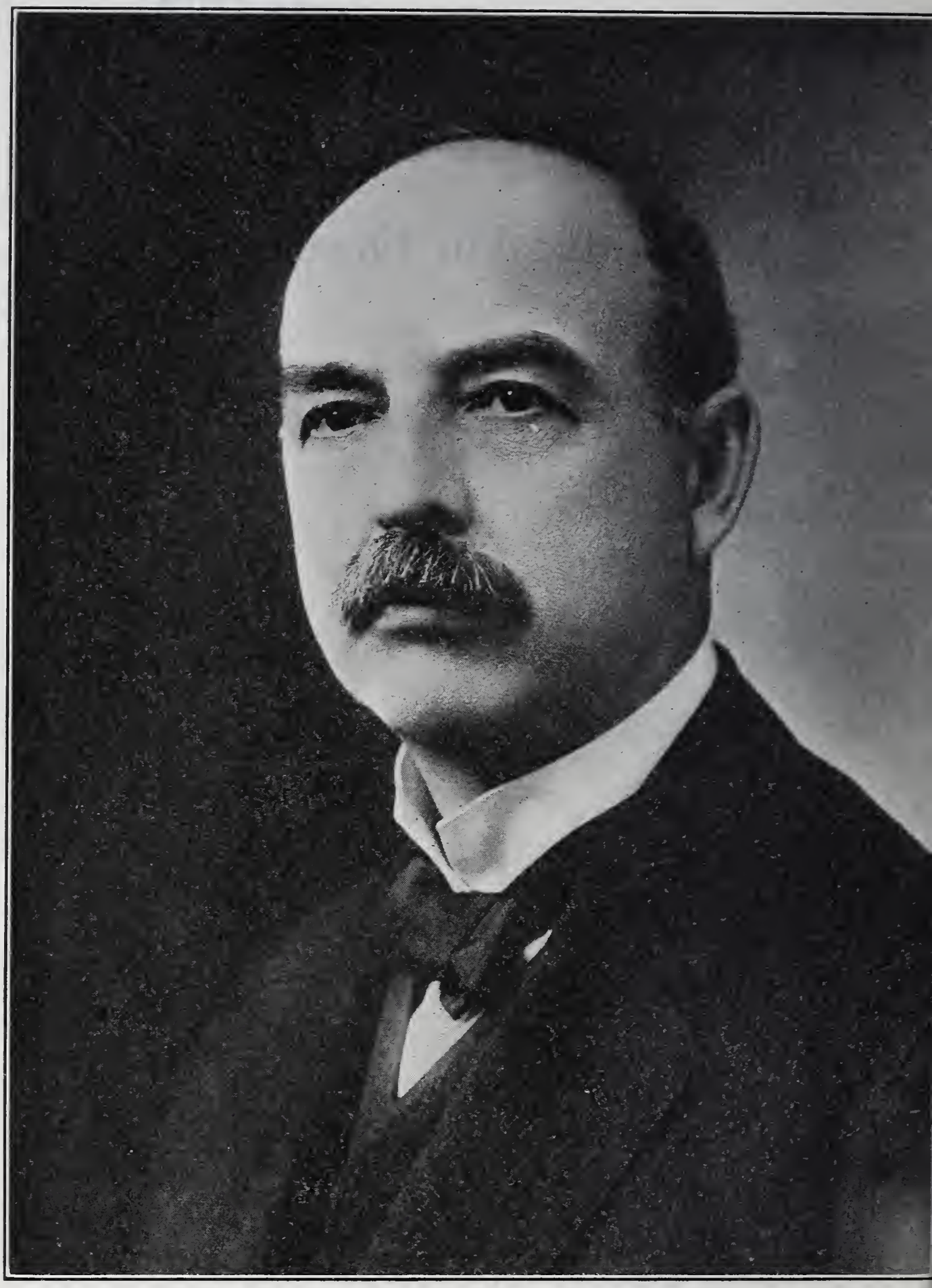

Hon. Cato Sells
Commissioner of Indian Affairs

A MAN AND HIS OPPORTUNITY

By M. K. Sniffen
Secretary Indian Rights Association.

We have frequently been asked for an opinion regarding the administration of Hon. Cato Sells, the present Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Heretofore we have stated to all such inquiries that we believed the outlook for improved conditions under his management was more hopeful than it had been for many years. Before making any public statement on the subject, however, we preferred to wait until Commissioner Sells had demonstrated his worth. He has been actively in charge of the Indian Bureau for nine months, and his administration has therefore passed the experimental stage. During that time we have had abundant opportunity to closely observe the man and his methods, and we feel that it is now possible for us to give a mature, unbiased review of Mr. Sells' stewardship, as an answer to the question: "What do you think of the present Commissioner?" Unfortunately, there has been much occasion to criticise the Indian Bureau's management in the past, and it is a satisfaction to praise where that is possible,—to give credit to whom credit is due. It affords us peculiar pleasure to submit for the information of our members and friends the following sketch of Commissioner Sells' masterful work, and also to record our thanks to President Wilson and Secretary Lane for putting the "right man in the right place."

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When the present administration came into power, on March 4, 1913, there was a feeling of deep concern by the friends of the Red Man as to the kind of man who would

be selected for the post of Commissioner of Indian Affairs. This feeling was further intensified by our investigation of the record of a number of those who were seeking "to land the job"; for it developed that in this group the "undesirable class" was decidedly conspicuous and aggressive.

THE PROMISE

On March 15, 1913, a large delegation of the Executive Committee of the Indian Rights Association was granted a most courteous hearing by President Wilson and Secretary Lane of the Interior Department, when attention was called to the importance of selecting a Commissioner who would command the respect of the entire country. Our Committee was assured that the best man obtainable would be selected. President Wilson said he wanted for the place "a man of affairs, because he has millions to administer; a man of imagination, that he may have sympathy for the Indian; and, above all, a man with the fear of God in his heart."

Secretary Lane tersely expressed the same thought when he said he wanted a "big man" for the place, one to whom it "would not be a *job*, but an *opportunity*."

THE FULFILLMENT

This interview took place in March, but it was not until June that the place was filled by the appointment of Hon. Cato Sells, of Cleburne, Texas. To indicate the care exercised by Secretary Lane in selecting the present Commissioner, it is interesting to state that before Mr. Sells was appointed his record was thoroughly investigated from the time he was twenty years old; he was literally "weighed in the balance" and *not* found wanting.

Mr. Sells brought to his office a well-rounded equipment probably never possessed by any former Commissioner,—that of lawyer, business man and agriculturalist, fully qualifying him to handle the Bureau's various ramifications

which involve every phase of human life and necessarily draw upon such an equipment every day in the proper performance of the duties of the office. First of all he is "a man of affairs," having served as Mayor of La Porte, Iowa, when he was but twenty-two years old; two terms as County attorney; and as U. S. Attorney under President Cleveland. Although active and successful in his profession, he became deeply interested in stock-raising and farming, and for years was a member of the Board of Trustees of the Iowa Agricultural College, Ames, Iowa. In 1907 he moved to Texas and was successful in the banking business. In that connection he took such an active interest in developing the resources of the State, that he was a member of practically every important agricultural board in Texas.

As to the qualities of imagination and sympathy, they are evident from the broad and humane way in which Commissioner Sells has been grasping situations and developing plans for the benefit and advancement of the Indian in a material and moral way. He has shown that he has that other requirement specified by the President,—"The fear of God in his heart,"—by "hewing to the line," and adopting methods that will have a salutary and lasting effect.

As was well stated by some Washington correspondent in commenting on Mr. Sells' administration:

"The job of Indian Commissioner with him is a business proposition. He answered an altruistic call when he took the position, for he had retired from active business and had planned to settle down in Texas, the state he has lived in ever since he left Iowa after a brilliant career as a United States attorney.

"Secretary Lane let it be known that he wanted a man of ability, not a job-seeker, a man of red blood and purpose, not a weakling. He heard of Sells and his fight against pension grafters in the middle west, and he found that Sells was indeed a regular fighting man, with ability, altruism, and that's how today, Secretary Lane has a man on the job of Indian Affairs fourteen hours a day, and

that's why a new era is dawning in Oklahoma and the other Indian states."

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Commissioner Sells entered upon the duties of his office with no preconceived notions. He announced no policies, but began a thorough inventory of his "plant," with its 6,000 employes, and a careful survey of the whole field.

One of the first things that impressed him was the great value to the Indians of their grazing tracts. The breaking up of the big ranges in Texas and other states has practically eliminated stock-raising on an extensive scale. The best and largest tracts available for cattle and sheep are on the Indian Reservation, from which the Indian has received but small returns. Heretofore those advantages have been leased, at a small annual rental, to white men, who have grown rich, while the owners either remained stationary or actually retrograded.

Commissioner Sells believed that these natural advantages should be used for the benefit of the Indian owners. Within ten days after taking his office, Commissioner Sells inaugurated a stock census. The result showed, as against magnificent opportunities, a very poor equipment—bulls and stallions of low grade and too old for use. The sheep situation was similar. Useless pony stallions by the thousand were grazing on the ranges and bringing no return to the Indians.

The first real work of Commissioner Sells in this connection was to reduce the old "he-stuff," and to purchase a sufficient number of good stallions, bulls and rams to secure the best result with the "she-stuff," both in the case of tribal and individual ownership;—in short, to build up the Indian stock wherever money was available for such purposes. For the Crow reservation alone $450,000 has been expended for 9,250 white-faced Hereford heifers, bulls and steers.

As a result of this plan there is now going on a process of upbuilding and equalizing the Indian stock and elim-

inating that which is bringing no return. As rapidly as circumstances will permit, the various reservation ranges will be stocked to the maximum limit with Indian cattle. If this can be done, not only will thousands of Red Men soon be in the industrious and self-supporting class, but they will be an important factor in helping to avert a meat famine, threatened by the white man's diminishing herds.

Where grazing leases are now made to white men, they are always on a competitive basis, and for short terms. A revocable clause is part of the lease, to avoid overstocking the ranges, and also to provide for the natural increase of the Indian herds. This plan, under proper management, should not take many years to make the Indian the American Cattle King.

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Much is being planned for the Indians' industrial development by Commissioner Sells, along practical lines. The value and necessity for "Reimbursable funds," have been recognized in the past, but the amount heretofore granted by Congress (never exceeding $100,000 per annum) has been wholly insufficient. Commissioner Sells, with his broad experience in scientific agriculture and stock raising, believes in doing things in a way that will secure definite results, and he asked Congress for a reimbursable fund of $900,000, to use in cases where the Indians have no tribal money that can be applied for their benefit.

There has undoubtedly been, in the past, an indefensible, one-sided, unbusiness-like conception of the Indians' needs in various quarters. Extensive and expensive irrigation systems have been built on reservations, the Indians given individual tracts of land, and then left absolutely without any means for developing them. An irrigation system for the Blackfeet reservation, Montana, was authorized by Congress, at a cost of $6,000,000 to be charged against these Indians. As their tribal property is only valued at $5,000,000, they will, under the scheme, be in debt to the Government for one million

dollars. The people mostly to be benefited by this are white men who are to be allowed fifteen years in which to pay for the improvement. By this plan their lands are brought under an irrigation system at the Indians' expense. Meanwhile, the Indian is without any funds with which to develop his allotment and make beneficial use of the water in time to escape the forfeiture provision.

The Uintah and Ouray reservation, in Utah, was also brought under a reclamation project. It is eighty miles from a railroad. The Indians were placed on raw land, with no equipment for breaking and improving it, but under obligation to get the water on their individual holdings within a few years or forfeit their water rights. This is expecting something that no white man could do under similar circumstances. Yet some people wonder why the Indian does not progress more rapidly towards self-support.

These instances are cited to show some of the situations with which the Commissioner is dealing in an effort to hold for the Indian what he has, and also to indicate why a large reimbursable fund is absolutely necessary if the best results are to be accomplished. By its judicious use, Commissioner Sells could help such people to secure farming implements, horses and cattle, so necessary for agriculture; to build up comfortable and sanitary homes; to utilize their own timber and other resources which heretofore has been impossible.

Commissioner Sells is determined to bring about a radical and speedy change in the present unsatisfactory agricultural, stock and industrial conditions generally existing throughout the Indian country. Instructions have been sent to all reservations that "every Indian service farmer shall give his time to actual farming and under no circumstances shall he continue, as so generally has been done, making the office work the first consideration and the promoting of the farm work of the Indians secondary. These things must be reversed." Superintendents are also directed to devote the major part of their time to field work, in order that they may come in direct contact

with the Indians and know actual conditions and stimulate individual effort. Heretofore, the majority of reservation superintendents have devoted three-fourths or more of their time to office duties, much of which can be performed by clerks. The Commissioner contends that "Reservation employes should know the Indians and know them well; understand their condition and substantially aid them in their forward march toward self-support and equipment for citizenship."

Another important question calling for vigorous attention on the part of Commissioner Sells was the probate situation in Oklahoma. This is summarized in a statement made by the Commissioner to the Denver Times, in part as follows:

"The Indian children of Oklahoma are the richest average children in the United States; however, it is a lamentable fact that they have less statutory protection there than in any other state. In each of the forty counties in eastern Oklahoma there are now pending from 800 to 1,500 probate estates, about 85 per cent of which are Indian children's estates.

"I have recently discovered that it costs about three per cent to settle a white child's estate, and that it costs more than twenty per cent to settle the estate of an Indian boy or girl. This is the result of guardians having been appointed without regard to their equipment and the acceptance of bondsmen many times wholly insolvent.

"Enormous fees have been charged by attorneys, and unconscionable fees by guardians, together with indefensible expenditures of their funds which has frequently resulted in the dissipation of their entire property.

"It is not an uncommon thing when an Indian child reaches his majority to find that his guardian has absconded, and that his bondsmen are wholly financially irresponsible. It is my determined intention to reform this indefensible condition, and to this end I have recently appointed a number of probate attorneys who will give their whole time under my direction to this work. I am now submitting a number of cases to the grand juries in Oklahoma looking towards the indictment and criminal prosecution of those who have embezzled funds.

"Last week we secured a ruling from one of the courts of Oklahoma, holding a guardian and his bondsmen responsible where the Indian children's lands have been sold for a grossly inadequate consideration. It is my great desire to co-operate with the state authorities and particularly with the county judges in effecting these results, and I have every reason to believe that this co-operation will be perfectly arranged and carried out."

Mr. Sells visited Oklahoma for a personal conference on this subject with the tribal attorneys, probate attorneys, field clerks and county judges. In the past there was always a feeling of antagonism between the Oklahoma people and the Washington authorities. It was so intense that co-operation was practically impossible. As a result of the Commissioner's trip, a spirit of co-operation was developed, and there is now a disposition on the part of Oklahomans to accept the attitude of the Government, and a desire to help reform conditions. As a result of these conferences a set of uniform rules governing probate cases was adopted by the county judges that are more complete than any statute of the United States. The outlook is very promising for a "clean up" and an elevation of the Oklahoma standard, and an improvement in conditions that will be an everlasting credit to the administration and gratifying to every one interested in Indian affairs. A complete reorganization has been effected; a good system adopted, and hearty co-operation of the county judges with the Federal Government has been established. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that since Commissioner Sells visited Oklahoma there have been several convictions and sentences to the penitentiary for those charged with robbing the Indian minor children.

Before his trip to Oklahoma, Commissioner Sells asked Congress for $50,000 for probate attorneys. Upon his return to Washington he appeared before the Indian Committee of the House and asked for more money. The amount was increased to $85,000 for this purpose,—an indication of the forceful and convincing manner in which

the Commissioner presents to the Congress the needs of his bureau, and the confidence his statements inspire.

The firmness and determination of Commissioner Sells to do things on business principles is indicated in his handling the oil situation in Oklahoma, where many leases had been made covering Indian lands. Heretofore, the lessees had been allowed to do practically as they pleased; departmental regulations were ignored, which resulted in an enormous waste of gas. One company which held a lease on a Creek Indian allotment, had been warned of its violation of these regulations, but that produced no effect. Commissioner Sells thereupon imposed a fine of $1,000 on this company, and indicated very forcibly that failure on the part of others to respect their agreements would invite a cancellation of their leases.

Commissioner Sells' reorganization of the Indian Bureau has been the work of a genius. When he took charge, it was badly torn by faction and strife. The personal ambition of a few people had produced a demoralized and chaotic condition, which often resulted in the Bureau's real purpose—the welfare of the Indian—being lost sight of. The effect of this was not confined to Washington, but had spread throughout the field service. It was truly a "house divided against itself." By the use of tact and judgment, Mr. Sells has developed into the Bureau a spirit of loyalty, harmony and hearty co-operation that has not existed for a long time, if ever before. The employes were literally inspired by the magnetic personality of their chief; his activity and enthusiasm were contagious, and the responsiveness in efficiency has been little short of marvellous. The Commissioner has aimed to so adjust matters that there would be no round pegs in square holes, and to assign the clerks to work that was not only congenial but to which they were adapted. As a result, the work is now nearer up to date than at any time in the Bureau's history. This has been brought about by increased efficiency, by system, and the loyalty of the subordinates who willingly worked nights as well as days,

in keeping with the pace set by Mr. Sells. It is unreasonable, however, to expect them to do this indefinitely, and additional clerical help should be provided by Congress.

One noticeable improvement is in handling what are known as individual Indian moneys. Formerly when a request for authority to draw on these funds came in from the field, weeks and months elapsed before it was acted upon. Now, in most cases, these requests are disposed of the same day they reach the Bureau, and reach the reservations within a week or ten days after the original mailing date.

Another important advance step is shown in the reorganization of the inspection force. Commissioner Sells secured for his Chief Inspector, Mr. E. B. Linnen, formerly attached to the office of the Secretary of the Interior. Mr. Linnen's long and honorable record for honesty and efficiency in the Government service is of itself a guarantee that hereafter the Bureau's inspection force will not be "weak in the head, weak-eyed and hard of hearing." The Commissioner desires to substantially strengthen his inspection force by the appointment of a few specially equipped, high grade and dependable confidential men who can be relied upon to help in the work of "cleaning up" the service,—men who will not be handicapped by previous personal friendship for the officials to be investigated. The Treasury and other Departments have a secret service corps, but no where is it more needed than in the Indian Service. It is believed that in the near future numerous changes will be made in the personnel of the service which will greatly improve its efficiency.

In selecting Mr. E. B. Meritt as Assistant Commissioner, Mr. Sells secured a man of honesty, efficiency, experience and courage. Mr. Meritt's record in the Indian Bureau proves that he is thoroughly dependable; his fearless, and practically single-handed fight to prevent a corporation from securing the San Carlos dam site will long be remembered. The Commissioner can leave his office, when occasion requires it, with no fear that his confidence will

be abused, and with the assurance that his plans will be loyally and wisely adhered to by Mr. Meritt.

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Commissioner Sells does not regard his post as a *job*, but an *opportunity* to help a race of over 300,000, whose property interests are valued at $900,000,000; and he has been seeking in every possible way to imbue his subordinates with the same thought,—to emphasize the human side of the Bureau's work. He believes in getting his workers together for conference, as a means of promoting a clear understanding and unity of effort. He called in to Washington every supervisor in the service, and met with them twice a day for one week. They returned to their respective posts with new hope and ambition to accomplish things; to spread the spirit of co-operation throughout the entire field.

Commissioner Sells spent two days at Denver, in conference with the Liquor suppression staff, to organize a systematic procedure to secure the best results. The good effect of these personal relations with his subordinates are apparent in every direction.

Mr. Sells is a keen, intelligent listener, and has but little to say for publication. He believes in *doing* things rather than talking about them, and his *actions* tell their own story. When he does talk on a public occasion, his remarks are forceful and direct, with a ring of sincerity about them. At the conference of Indian Supervisors, held recently in Washington, Mr. Sells made an address from which the following is taken:

"I believe that the greatest present menace to the American Indian is whiskey. It does more to destroy his constitution and invite the ravages of disease than anything else: It does more to demoralize him as a man and frequently as a woman: It does more to make him an easy prey to the unscrupulous than everything else combined. If I say nothing more to you tonight that leaves an impression, let it be this one thought: *Let us save the American Indian from the curse of whiskey.*

"We have a force of men engaged in the suppression of

the liquor traffic. That is their special business. But it is my business, and it is your business, to do everything we can without injecting ourselves offensively into the work of others or assuming a duty that is not properly ours, to create an atmosphere, and suggest conditions that will be helpful in this respect, and above all to be a personal object-lesson inviting the Indian to banish liquor, rather than to be guilty of anything that may cause him to look upon one of us as a justification for doing that which leads him to the destruction caused by the use of whiskey.

"There is nothing that could induce me, since I have taken the oath of office as Commissioner of Indian Affairs, to touch a single drop of any sort of intoxicating liquor, and this regardless of my attitude on the Prohibition question.

"As a matter of good faith to our treaty relationships, to legislative enactments, to the Congress which appropriates $100,000 a year for the suppression of the liquor traffic among the Indians, we should do everything reasonably within our power to justify this appropriation and insure the best results obtainable. This accomplished, we have laid a substantial foundation for all of our work in solving the Indian problem, and made a long step forward looking toward their equipment for the responsibilities of citizenship."

The nearest approach of Commissioner Sells to announcing any policy, is given at the close of his first annual report, in which he says:

"I am emphasizing in every possible way the industrial education of the Indian pupils and the industrial development of the Indian population generally, and every effort is being made to improve the efficiency of the employes of the Indian Service, in order to accomplish more successfully the work in hand.

"I am also emphasizing the need of, and doing everything possible to obtain for the Indians more sanitary homes, more adequate school facilities for the Indian children, to supply sick Indians with medical attention and to take precautionary methods to prevent disease, to adjust more equitably the cost of irrigation projects constructed with reimbursable funds, to make larger use of the timber resources of the Indians for their industrial

and social advancement, to take advantage of the extensive grazing land of the Indians and to build up tribal herds as well as to promote among the individual Indians a large, more profitable cattle, sheep and horse industry, and to utilize in every practicable way the resources of the Indians, both tribal and individual, in promoting and completing their civilization and economic independence.

"It is my fixed purpose to bring about the speedy individualizing of the Indians, and to this end I shall devote my best efforts."

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That Secretary Lane found the man to whom the Commissionership would be an *opportunity* and not a *job*, is clear from Mr. Sells' refusal to accept an important and more lucrative post in another branch of the Government service. Commenting on this the "New Republic" said:

"Cato Sells, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, has the most difficult, annoying, nerve racking, heart eating job in the United States. He did not apply for the job or any other job. He was 'drafted' into the service as a public duty. He gets a salary of $5,000 per year.

"Recently, the Interstate Commerce Commission, in quest of a high-grade man to put at the head of the work of making a physical valuation of the railways of the United States, offered the post to Mr. Sells at a salary of $7,500, a comparatively easy and comfortable position.

"Did this offer of comparative ease and $2,500 addition to the salary attract Sells? Not a bit. Three hundred thousand Indians were looking to him to relieve them from the results of a hideous maladministration and from a network of accumulated abuses. He had entered upon the task; it had taken a grip upon his heart and life that no offer of ease or increased salary could shake.

"And the squeals and howls of rage and pain that are going up from grafters and thieves around Indian reservations indicate that there is 'something doing.'

"Long live Cato Sells and may he have the physical strength to carry out his program, a program that wrecked the health of two commissioners who honestly undertook the task."

It is understood that when Mr. Sells declined the first tender of this position a second offer was made with materi-

ally increased salary. His sense of duty and an appreciation of his opportunity were stronger than the selfish thought of material gain.

As a result of Mr. Sells' brief tenure of office, the standard of efficiency and honesty has been raised throughout the Indian service,—both in Washington and in the field. The work he has set out to do, however, is by no means completed. The Big Things,—those demanding urgent consideration,—are being disposed of as quickly as possible. When they are well under way, other matters will, we believe, receive proper attention. What has been thus far done is a good indication of what may be expected in a general cleaning up of every part of the Indian service.

It should not be overlooked, however, that Commissioner Sells' firm determination to preserve the vast resources of the Indian, in land, timber, coal and oil, must sooner or later develop great disappointment and bitter opposition from selfish interests; and it is highly important that the true friends of an honest and efficient administration shall strongly support him in his patriotic and fearless course.

Our observation indicates that there has been developed a general feeling of confidence in Mr. Sells' ability, integrity and courage on the part of the public and the press; and Congress, for the first time within our knowledge of Indian Affairs, seems to be in sympathy with the Commissioner, and willing to grant the necessary appropriations to carry on the work.

Commissioner Sells has established a new mark in Indian administration, and his influence for good can never be eradicated. He has elevated the service to a plane from which he would not recede if he could, and from which he could not recede if he would. He has set the pace, and whoever may follow him (in the far distant future, we hope), will of necessity be compelled to live up to those established ideals or suffer by comparison.